



## Societies Without Borders

Volume 10 | Issue 1

Article 4

2015

# Review of Obama Power by Jeffrey C. Alexander and Bernadette N. Jaworsky (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

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### Recommended Citation

Arin, Kubilay Y.. 2015. "Review of Obama Power by Jeffrey C. Alexander and Bernadette N. Jaworsky (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).". *Societies Without Borders* 10 (1).

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol10/iss1/4>

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**Jeffrey C. Alexander and Bernadette N. Jaworsky: *Obama Power*  
(Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).**

Jeffrey Alexander and Bernadette Jaworsky examine President Barack Obama's reelection campaign against GOP nominee Mitt Romney to illustrate the importance of class and big money in the contest for power in a presidential run-off. On what base is Obama's power founded? How could, after the disastrous loss in the 2010 congressional elections, Obama outplay his rival against all odds and regain the White House in November 2012? Both professors attest Obama following characteristics: "Demonstrating their moral trustworthiness, successful political performers work furiously to push their opponents outside the world of civility into the immoral world outside" (p. 3).

Alexander and Jaworsky underline the political reality: "As the president's performance lost symbolic power, the Tea Party rose up and unceremoniously kicked the once and future American hero off the public stage" (p. 8) in the Democratic congressional defeat in 2010. The authors further argue that "Obama's symbolic power had withered in the face of intense partisanship and political paralysis" (p. 14) Obama confronted high unemployment rates, the questioning of the Bin Laden assassination, the health care debate and Hurricane Sandy. The abstractedness of his rival and his calibrated speech saved the President. "This book describes the symbolic deflation of Obama's early years in office and explains how the Democratic president found a way to get his mojo working again" (p. 9). Enduring crises and enhancing his public profile, the President proved his charisma: "If liberal and center audiences did eventually regain hope, it was because President Obama found a way to become a collective symbol of democratic ideal once again" (p. 26).

The authors analyze Obama's electoral victory, ascribing it to the effective use of symbols and grand story-telling and a political script to win the hearts and minds of the electorate. "This Book is not about the exercise of Obama power during the Democrat president's second term in office, but about what gave him the opportunity to do so – his odds-defying victory in the 2012 presidential campaign" (p. VI). Jeffrey Alexander and Bernadette Jaworsky argue that "President Obama had managed to transform an arcane budget fight into a struggle over the heart of the civil sphere, countering conservative austerity for the mass of Americans with a script demanding shared sacrifice and cross-class solidarity" (p. 63)

Unlike Clinton Obama did not retreat "from the left to the center and fiddle with moderately conservative forms of legislative compromise" (p. 27). The authors stress that "Obama insisted that tax rates on the rich must be raised, supplying revenue that would move the budget toward balance without cutting services for those who needed them most" (p. 30-31). As Alexander and Jaworsky convincingly demonstrate the political strategy that "(t)he Obama campaign hammered on the issue of class, continuing its push to

portray Romney as a one-percenter completely out of touch with ordinary Americans, not to mention that he kept secret foreign bank accounts and sent American jobs abroad” (p. 57)

Why didn't Obama's predicted defeat in 2012 happen? While Alexander and Jaworsky do mention Republican in-fighting and Romney's inept campaign, they bring forward that this line of argumentation is not sufficient without taking into consideration “the power of the cultural narratives, symbols, and beliefs” that Obama referred to in his speeches: “An ad from the Obama campaign suggested that his opponents' commitment to cutting government healthcare represented favoritism to the wealthy” (p. 64). As Alexander and Jaworsky attempt to explain the results of the elections where culture takes center-stage, the authors show how Obama's GOP rivals could not undo his efforts to portray his campaign theme of ‘universalism and solidarity’ which got him re-elected: “What was decisive was Obama's ability to make meaning – to become a powerful political symbol – and Romney's inability in turn. Cultural symbols and dramatic performances determined the fate of Obama's presidency.(...) The premise of this book is that citizens don't rationally deliberate the ‘real’ qualities of candidates so much as they experience emotionally their projected moral tone”(p.2).

Both professors see the American Dream come true in Obama's personal career: “As [Obama] moved from one station to another, from community organizer, to law student, to constitutional law professor, and finally to earnest politician, he sought to convince ever wider audiences of Americans, that, if they trusted him, he would help repair the nation's institutions so that its utopian dreams could become more real” (p.91)

The two sociologists mention his ignorance for race issues: “As president, Obama was determined not to be captured by the myriad minorities whose utopian dreams he so powerfully projected. (...) The first African American president rarely spoke publicly about racism, the legacy of slavery, or the suffering of the black underclass, and he never proposed remedial governmental action aimed explicitly at this demographic group. Obama projected sympathy for the powerless and excluded, but he did not present himself as serving them. He performed, rather, as a symbol of American democracy and on behalf of the wider, civil solidarity he believed it entailed” (p. 92) Nonetheless, he was tough on immigration and “sharply increased policing of America's border with Mexico and the prosecution and deportation of aliens with criminal records” while he issued “an executive order permanently blocking the deportation of 800,000 children of undocumented immigrants” (p. 92).

Romney, on the contrary, the authors suggest “actually did believe half of the nation paid no taxes, that they were abjectly dependent on government, and that he would have to write them off as possible supporters of the Republican campaign” (p. 71). Despite large donations to the GOP's presidential campaign, Alexander and Jaworsky maintain that “on a democratic playing field big money can be a symbolic disadvantage.

Romney's personal wealth and his ties to the corporate world were potentially polluting", the authors claim (p. 105). To sum up, we may say that Alexander and Jaworsky describe the race between incumbent President Obama and his Republican contender Romney as a class contest between the self-made newcomer Obama and the elitist, establishment- old-hand Romney: the self-styled underdog vs. the white-collar millionaire.